

The Swedes

in Pennsylvania

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The Peoples
of Pennsylvania

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THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION

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Foreword

The United States is composed of people from many cultural and national backgrounds. Americans can trace their ancestry to Europeans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Australians and American Indians. Today, our population consists of people from over one hundred ethnic groups.

Since its founding in 1681, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been among the states with the greatest diversity of population. While Pennsylvanians share a common regional and political identity, they also form a mixture of national and ethnic cultures and religious traditions. No history of the Commonwealth would be adequate without coverage of the rich diversity of Pennsylvania's populace.

Thus, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is publishing these booklets which depict ethnic groups as a means of introducing to the public the history of the many peoples who have made Pennsylvania's history and who have built this great Commonwealth. In this way the Commission continues its efforts to preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of all Pennsylvanians.

Cover: Members of the Swedish Folkdancers of New York, in provincial costume, pause during Midsommarfest (Midsummer Festival), the traditional Swedish holiday celebrated annually at the American Swedish Historical Museum, Philadelphia. Photograph courtesy the Museum.

The Swedes in Pennsylvania

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Pennsylvania, the Quaker State, bears the family name of the young Englishman who became Proprietor of the colony in 1681. But when William Penn was born, he was no Quaker; and in that year, the region that later as a colony was to honor his name already contained within its future boundaries a local government of European origin. The year was 1644, and the community that was gradually expanding along the banks of the Delaware River called itself *Nya Sverige*. In English, that is "New Sweden," but it would be twenty years before English became the official language of this colony. For eighteen years more, Swedish remained the first language of the populace.

In fact, the second language of New Sweden was almost certainly Finnish. For many centuries past—and until 1809—Finland had been united with and under the authority of the Kingdom of Sweden. Indeed, a high proportion of the colonists on the Delaware were Finns in language and culture, or were *Finlandssvenskar*—the ethnic Swedes who through settlement had become a majority of the population in the coastal provinces of Finland. Since Sweden had projected her American colony at the height of her military success in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), her domain at the time extended to the coastline of the Baltic Sea, much of Poland and Prussia, and a number of independent German towns. These more temporary of Sweden's possessions were required to furnish recruits for military service. By this route, the Delaware Valley acquired a few additional colonists from Saxony, Estonia, Karelia and elsewhere, who ended their service as soldiers and seamen by settling in New Sweden.

In 1644, one year into a term that was to last for a decade, the Governor of New Sweden moored his yacht next to his new fortified mansion on Tinicum Island, near what is now the Philadelphia International Airport. There, in a little Lutheran church built of logs beside the house of Governor Johan Printz, the first Europeans to settle permanently in Pennsylvania prayed for the safety of their monarch. That ruler, whose European domain was unsurpassed in size by any except that of the Russian Czar, was the only child of the great King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Her name was Christina, and in 1644 she was still a teenager.

Colonial History and Demography

New Sweden began in 1638 as an investment opportunity for a limited number of stockholders. Its economic basis was the supplying of beaver skins—obtained primarily from the Indians of the

Susquehanna Valley—for a nearly insatiable market across the Atlantic, where these American furs were made into expensive but durable all-weather hats. The trade in tobacco from the English planters of Maryland and Virginia was also brisk.

New Sweden did not yield the quick profits its founders had anticipated; and when Gov. Peter Stuyvesant sent Dutch troops from New Netherland in 1655, the Swedish government declined to contest his annexation of their little colony to his. Many of the officers of New Sweden, and soldiers whose term of service was not yet complete, returned to Sweden. The bulk of the civilian population, however, stayed in America. As late as 1664, settlers continued to arrive from Sweden, some of them following relatives who were already here.



Gov. Johan Printz

After three and a half centuries, the Swedish beginnings of Pennsylvania may seem to us misty and intangible, like a mirage or a dream. But they were real enough to William Penn when he first stepped ashore at the Swedish village of Upland—which he promptly renamed Chester. Penn soon learned to count on experienced Swedish fur traders to act as interpreters when he negotiated treaties or bought land from the Delaware and Susquehannock Indians. And when his agents had picked a site for the great metropolis that he was planning, Penn found it expedient to buy the land from three Swedish brothers named Svensson. They were farmers, as their father had been, in what is now downtown Philadelphia.

After William Penn had launched his colony the Swedes became a minority in Pennsylvania almost overnight. During four decades of Swedish, Dutch, and British government, only a few hundred permanent residents had been settled. Now Penn's recruitment program was swelling his colony by more than a thousand immigrants each year. There was no serious expectation that the Swedes might stay in control of affairs; the most they could hope for was to remain visible. That they succeeded at all was a small miracle. It was accomplished, as miracles so often are, in the context of their churches.

The Church, the Arts, and Science

When Penn arrived to take charge of his colony in person, the Swedes had been cut off effectively from their homeland for about twenty years. Though they still spoke Swedish, the young people no longer were learning to read and write the mother tongue. Only a handful of Swedish books were left in the Delaware Valley, and now only a few of the adults could read them. But among these were some of the very men Penn would find useful, as members of the Chester Court and of his Provincial Council, to interpret, and to advise on the interior topography of his colony. He was sympathetic, therefore, when in 1693 the Swedish community expressed a desire for pastors and teachers to replace those who had died or had become incapacitated by advancing age.

In their cultural crisis it was fortunate for the Swedes that religious toleration, required for the practice in a British colony of Penn's own Quaker faith, was a principle firmly maintained in Pennsylvania. Ironically, of the dozen or more Protestant denominations represented in colonial Pennsylvania, the Church of Sweden (though Lutheran) was by far the nearest in both theology and polity to the established Church of England. Even if he had not known and respected the Swedish petitioners, Penn could hardly have withheld his permission for the services of the only non-English missionary pastors in North America whose ordination and sacraments were recognized by the British government.

Therefore, two pastors were requested in 1693; in 1697 three arrived, beginning a mission in America that was supported by the Swedish Crown until after the American Revolution. In all, nearly thirty ministers of the Church of Sweden were sent. Among the most important of these, from the standpoint of Pennsylvania's cultural flowering, were the brothers Andreas and Samuel Hesselius—if only because they attracted to Philadelphia a third brother who was not a pastor, Gustavus Hesselius, the most distinguished portrait painter working in America during the first third of the eighteenth century. The portraits he painted of two Indian chieftains for Thomas Penn,

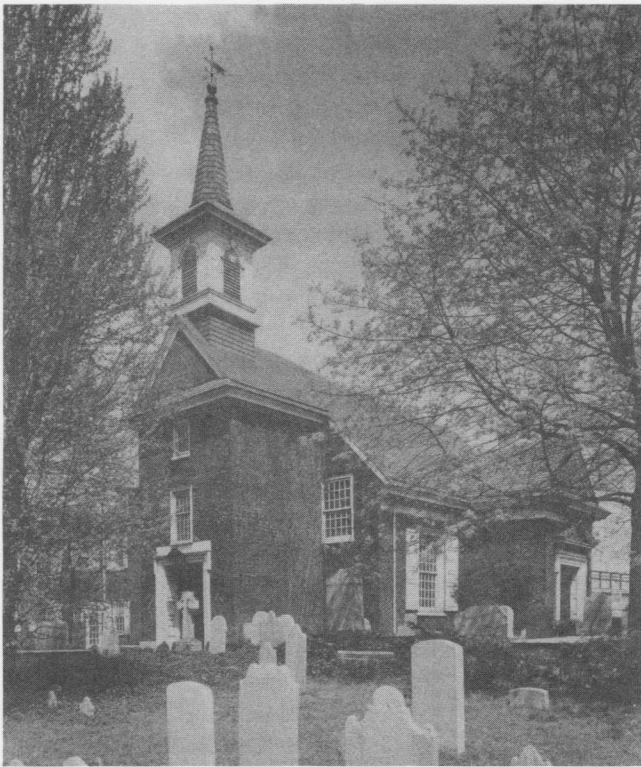
now owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, are without rival in the pictorial annals of American ethnology.

Several of the missionaries, furthermore, in their published writings have left American historians a different point of view of the people and land they visited. Israel Acrelius's 1759 history is especially well known in Pennsylvania. Even more famous is Peter Kalm's multivolume report on his travels in America; this renowned naturalist was not sent as a missionary, but did serve briefly one of the old Swedish churches in the winter of 1748. A friend of Philadelphia's most learned men, such as Benjamin Franklin and John Bartram, Kalm still had the curiosity and found the time to record the most trivial details of the everyday life of the Delaware Valley.

Kalm's travel journals are sources especially rich in stories told to him by second- and third-generation Swedish Americans. Many are amusing, sometimes because his informants appear to have been pulling his leg. In an appendix to his journal, he records peculiar verbal expressions that have arisen from the influence of English upon Swedish as spoken in America. An example is the statement of Pastor Samuel Hesselius, "Jag lusa min hustru på sjön." The informant means, "I lost my wife at sea," but he has unknowingly substituted a corruption of the English verb "lose" for the Swedish "miste." In pure Swedish, he seems to have said, "I am throwing my wife into the sea."

Officially, Kalm was representing the newly organized Swedish Academy of Sciences on a fact-finding expedition. Unofficially, he was a kind of personal scout for the great Swedish scientist Carl von Linné. Better known as Linnaeus, he was the originator of the modern system of double Latin names by which biological species are classified. Kalm's mentor from his university days at Uppsala, Linnaeus, showed his approval of this able assistant by naming the American mountain laurel tree (*Kalmia latifolia*) in his honor. After a distinguished academic career in Finland, Peter Kalm was buried in the church he served last, St. Mary's in Turku. (Pittsburgh is home to the largest American collection of works by or about Linnaeus, some four thousand volumes in the Strandell Room of the Hunt Institute at Carnegie-Mellon University.)

The last of the Church of Sweden missionaries who worked here was Nils Collin, who died in Philadelphia in 1831. Four of the "Old Swedes" churches these men served in Pennsylvania still are active today. All are now Episcopal churches: Gloria Dei (1700), on the site of the Wicaco church (1677), and St. James Kingsessing (1765), both in Philadelphia; Christ Church of Upper Merion (1760), near Bridgeport; and St. Gabriel's chapel (1800), on the site of the Morlatten church (1720) in Douglassville. Through the well-preserved records



In Gloria Dei "Old Swedes" Church in Philadelphia may be seen carvings of two cherubs and of the Bible, with texts in Swedish, which were removed from the Tinicum Island church and date from about 1646.

of these churches we may trace a few thousand descendants of the colonists from Sweden—but only those who maintained their church affiliation and those who didn't move often. It is clear from other sources that Swedes and Finns often chose to live on the frontiers, and early in the eighteenth century many were already too far into the American interior to be carried on the Swedish Lutheran church rolls.

The Moravian Church also benefited from the services of missionaries from Sweden, at least four of whom worked in Pennsylvania in the 1740s. Their work was opposed, rather than supported, by the Swedish government. The First Moravian Church in Lancaster can trace its origin to the work of one of these pioneers, Lars Nyberg, who is remembered also for the hymns he wrote in both Swedish and English. In Pennsylvania, he and the other Moravian pastors served churches whose usual language of worship was German.

Folk and Material Culture

Apart from churches, which are meant to be seen and which tend to last as long as they have members to support them, the legacy of seventeenth-century Swedish pioneers becomes less visible. A few of their early log houses survive in the Delaware Valley; two are on Darby Creek in Delaware County. The house of Morton Mortonson in Prospect Park was preserved as a tribute to his descendant John Morton, a Signer of

the Declaration of Independence. In more recent years it has been studied for clues to the origins of log building technology and architectural types in America. It is now a state historic site, open to the public during warm weather; just over a mile to the south is Governor Printz Park on Tinicum Island. Another early log house, on Upper Darby Creek in the Lansdowne area, is called the Lower Swedish Cabin.

Some of the more prosperous Swedes, like others who could afford to do so, built in brick and stone. Two examples of this are the early portion of the John Bartram house in South Philadelphia, and the 1716 Måns Jones house in Douglassville. Oddly enough, both of these stone houses were built by the same man. Måns Jones was a son of Jöns Nilsson, a soldier from the Skara district in central Sweden who came to New Sweden in 1643.

It is well known, and often published, that the Swedes on the Delaware were the first colonial American builders of the log house. Less generally known are the Swedish influences on other aspects of pioneer life. Long, sturdy keelboats of a Swedish type were introduced from the Delaware Valley to many of America's inland frontiers. Keelboats bore heavy products down shallow rivers to reach urban markets or seaports. Unlike the simpler flatboat and raft, a keelboat could make the trip back up the river with the aid of poles, ropes, oars, and sails.

This kind of boat became a critical transportation link in western Pennsylvania toward the end of the eighteenth century with settlement of the Ohio Valley. Keelboats on the Allegheny River were vital in the supply of Pittsburgh iron products to the American fleet under Commodore Perry that defeated the British on Lake Erie during the War of 1812.

American folklore remembers Mike Fink, a Pennsylvania German, as the definitive keelboatman; but old Pennsylvania Swedish families such as the Hulings and the Yocums had been active in this trade for several generations before Mike Fink was born and raised in the region that had been their home.

Many aspects of the folk culture of the American frontier may be traced in full or in part to the Swedes and Finns who brought their customs to Pennsylvania, where they took root among the general population. To some extent the influence of New Sweden may be seen in rail fences, hand-woven coverlets, leather hunting clothes, tunes on the fiddle, food on the table, and the Saturday evening bath. After a hundred years of acculturation, migration from this area toward the south and west spread the folkways of Pennsylvania, partially Swedish in origin, to much of the interior of this continent.

If one Swedish colonist had to be chosen to stand for them all, perhaps there is no better candidate than Peter Gunnarsson Rambo. He came to New Sweden from Hisingen, now a suburb of the major seaport of Gothenburg, in 1640. He was a young single man who

intended to put down roots in the most literal sense: as Kalm helpfully reports (having interviewed his grandson), Peter Rambo brought with him "apple seeds in a box." A few years later he married a girl who had come here from Vaasa, in Finland. When William Penn met him in 1682, he was a prosperous farmer on the Schuylkill, a retired member of the Upland Court, and a grandfather many times over.

It is still possible today to drive through the orchard country of Pennsylvania, or any other eastern state, and see the signs advertising Rambo apples. They are the first to ripen of the new crop each summer. It is also possible to find the name of Rambo in most telephone books, not to mention in movie titles; the identified descendants of Peter Rambo number well over forty thousand.

Later Immigration

The historical literature of Swedish Americans, much of it originating in Sweden, has traditionally made a clear distinction between the "colonists" sent from Sweden to New Sweden in the seventeenth century, and the "emigrants" who left Sweden of their own free will, for destinations of their own choosing, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From an American point of view, they were all immigrants (note the different spelling). While Delaware received much of the first group, and the upper Midwest was attractive to the second, no state received a greater share of both waves of immigration from Sweden than did Pennsylvania.

The Swedish Pioneer Centennial, which referred only to the later wave, was celebrated in 1948 after several years' delay caused by World War II. The United States commemorative postage stamp features a covered wagon, symbolic of the fact that so many of the Swedes moved in groups directly to the western plains. But Pennsylvania could claim one the earliest of these nineteenth-century immigrant communities. The small Swedish settlement of Chandlers Valley in Warren County had its beginning in 1846. It was a very unusual way to begin.

Letters from the first Swedish pioneers, of the region between Chicago and Milwaukee, were published frequently in the Stockholm newspapers. These accounts, enthusiastic in regard both to American farmland and American democracy, aroused a great interest in migration. In 1845 a prosperous farmer named Peter Cassel led a band of several families from his home parish of Kisa to settle together in Iowa; they named their community New Sweden. Their enthusiasm attracted others of their old neighbors, and in 1846 a second party of sixty-five Swedes, bound for Iowa, arrived in New York. Sadly, they got no farther than Albany, en route to a long steamship journey across the Great Lakes, when they were robbed of all their money.

Subsisting on wild plums and whatever they could find, they made their way by the Erie Canal as far as Buffalo. There the adults had to find jobs, and for two years many of them worked as farmhands at fifty cents a day to earn enough for the rest of their trip to Iowa. In the meantime some had to place their children in the "poorhouse," where they were subject to the nineteenth-century version of foster parenthood: in return for an agreement to feed, clothe, and educate the child, the new family acquired a legally indentured servant.

This fate befell Louise and Sara Sophia, the young daughters of Germund and Catharine Johnson from Kisa; the girls were taken in by separate American households in Warren County, Pennsylvania. In a short time their parents became so worried about these girls, aged nine and six, that they set out to walk ninety miles to see how they were faring. They found the children well cared for. The Robert Falconer family of Sugar Grove, who had taken in Sara Sophia, now called her Josephine. They offered Germund and his wife a year's employment—and thus began the second wave of Swedish immigration to Pennsylvania. Germund Johnson and other Swedes who soon joined him from Buffalo worked for a short while as woodcutters, and soon had enough money to buy farms of their own around Sugar Grove and Chandlers Valley. "A little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6) is inscribed, rather far from its Biblical context, on a monument to Louise and Josephine that was unveiled in 1946.

The first church for the Warren County Swedes was built in 1854 on land donated by Germund Johnson. This is the oldest church of Swedish origin in the eastern United States to have held Lutheran services continuously since its founding. The congregation is called "Hessel" Valley after the parish of Hässleby, in Småland, from which several of its founders came. During our Bicentennial year of 1976, the Archbishop of Sweden and His Majesty Carl XVI Gustaf, King of Sweden, visited the Hessel Valley church on separate occasions.

Ironically, Chandlers Valley became the launching pad for a much larger community in the state that its founders had been grateful to leave. Jamestown, just across the New York line, has today one of the most important and active Swedish American communities. The migration from Sweden to Jamestown, based upon employment for skilled workers in furniture and other industries, began in 1851. But the very first Swedes to move there, beginning with Johanna Charlotta Johnson in 1849, were from Chandlers Valley, Pennsylvania.

Another worthy representative of Chandlers Valley, born in the log parsonage in 1857, was the educator Carl Aaron Swensson. At the age of twenty-four, he founded Bethany College, a Swedish and Lutheran school in Lindsborg, Kansas. One year later

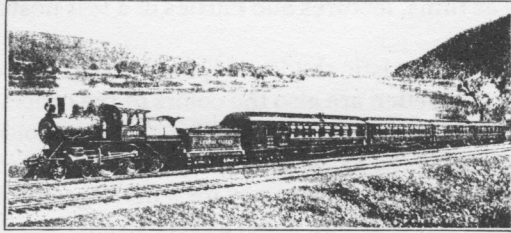


**Amerikanska Rese-
bekvämligheter.**

The

Lehigh Valley Railroad

Håller en stab af erfarna passagerareagenter, som möta vid alla ång-
batares ankomst till New York för att se efter biljettförsäljningen till
passagerare som skola fara till en plats i det inre af Amerikas
Förenta Stater.



This 1912 advertisement encouraged Swedish immigrants to take the Lehigh Valley Railroad westward through Pennsylvania.

Swensson organized the Bethany Oratorio Society, which has performed Handel's "Messiah" with orchestral accompaniment annually since 1882. The centennial performance from Bethany College was recorded in 1982, and was broadcast in the ensuing years at Eastertime by many public television stations throughout the country.

McKean County, adjoining Warren County on the east, was to become the destination of many more Swedish immigrants. In this case they did not select the end of their journey at random, but were recruited through the carefully orchestrated efforts of a land speculator, Thomas L. Kane. Apparently the only stockholder of a bankrupt development company who had access to large amounts of cash just after the Civil War, this former Colonel of the Union Army acquired the bulk of the company's assets, notably its vast holdings of land in McKean and Elk counties. Thomas Kane advertised extensively in Europe for settlers. While some Italian, German, and Welsh purchasers immigrated, by far the most lively sales took place among the Swedes. These sales were assisted certainly by the proximity of established Swedish farms, churches, and merchants; and the Swedish papers from Jamestown, *Folkets Röst* ("Voice of the People") and *Skandia*, served nearby Pennsylvania as a local market. The Swedish settlement of Kanesholm had begun by 1865, and in 1870 Thomas Kane's land company donated the site for a Swedish church there. A circular printed for Kane in Swedish advertises fifty-acre farms to be sold by June 1876 at a price between four and thirteen dollars an acre.

The advertisement, with a map on the cover showing the road and rail network for this part of Pennsylvania and New York, achieved great success in Sweden. The farmers probably did not know, until they got here, that Kane was reserving the mineral rights under the land he sold them. On the other hand, Kane did not realize for some years that the bituminous coal was not worth the expense of extracting it. Taking one thing with another, all parties got a fairly good deal: the land was reasonably priced, Kane could recover his investment, the Swedes were good farmers, and the tax base increased to pay for roads and other improvements.

One of the most interesting buildings in McKean County is the 1886 Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Nebo Church in Mt. Jewett. It is an octagonal frame building, externally patterned upon Ersta Kyrka in Danviken parish near Stockholm. The congregation has met elsewhere since 1950, but the building is maintained and used for special services several times a year. It is also open during the Mt. Jewett "Swede Fest," the second weekend in August.

The Modern Era

Swedish migration to America reached its peak in the 1880s, but continued fairly numerous and steady until the period of isolationism after World War I, when new American immigration laws made it much more difficult to get into this country. An article on the Swedes in Pennsylvania published in 1924 lists fifty-odd places in the state with "more or less" significant Swedish populations. These range from several thousand in greater Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Wilkes-Barre, to tiny hamlets of one or two families. Of these smaller communities, in which a Swedish presence was noticeable because there was little ethnic competition, a dozen lie along the Grand Army of the Republic Highway (U.S. 6). Almost as many are not far from U.S. 6 in the same northern tier of counties. With the single exception of Philadelphia, all of the identified Swedish migration was to parts of the state in, or to the north and west of, the Susquehanna Valley.

The Pittsburgh area exemplifies the fact, often overlooked, that the majority of Swedish immigrants to America have not been farmers, in Minnesota or elsewhere. Statistically, most have lived in cities, and have worked in factories. The particular affinity of Swedish workers for the Pittsburgh area is related to Sweden's very long history as a producer of high-quality iron and steel.

The most aggressive recruitment of Swedish labor for the Pittsburgh area was undertaken by Andrew Carnegie, who also hired from the better-educated class of engineers and draftsmen trained in Sweden. For well over half a century, beginning with Per Torsten Berg in 1888, the Chief Engineer at Carnegie's Homestead steelworks was a Swede. Berg and his

successors, A. W. Söderberg and Anders G. Ericson, invented many processes to increase the efficiency and quality of steel manufacturing. Several steel companies, including Midland and Bethlehem, were founded or were supervised, much of the time, by engineers born and educated in Sweden.

The Swedish population of the Pittsburgh area was concentrated, up the Monongahela Valley from Homestead, in Munhall, Braddock, Duquesne, McKeesport, Clairton, Irwin, and Greensburg. *Svenska Veckobladet* ("The Swedish Weekly Blade") was an ambitious newspaper published in McKeesport from 1890 to 1918; and the *Swedish Forum* was a publication in English that focused upon western Pennsylvania topics. Early in this century Braddock, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia all had Swedish newspapers of a more local character.

Philadelphia is a special case, in regard both to its size and its history. As part of the industrial heartland of the country since the dawn of the eighteenth century, the region has always been a magnet for manufacturers. Among those of Swedish descent who contributed to the American cause as early as the Revolutionary War were the old Philadelphia shipwright Michael Hulings, the forged-cannon maker Samuel Wheeler, and the iron founder Mark Bird. At Hopewell Village National Historic Site, near Elverson, Bird's ironworks have been preserved and rebuilt.

Modern business ownership and control tend to be more dispersed, often international, and less simply attributable to individuals or small groups. The SKF ball bearing business, for instance, is a Swedish company that has had a major presence in Philadelphia since 1916—at which time Volvo was a subsidiary of SKF. The G. O. Carlson company, on the other hand, manufacturer of high-quality plate metal in Chester County, was founded by the son of two Swedish immigrants to western Pennsylvania. ESB, Inc. was headed successively by two Swedish brothers, Rudolph C. and Carl F. Norberg; their Philadelphia firm made storage batteries. One of the spectacular architectural features of the greater Philadelphia area is the Cathedral of the New Church in Bryn Athyn, finished in 1919 and called by some the most beautiful Gothic building in America. This rather small denomination follows the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, a brilliant and prolific writer whose father, Jesper Svedberg, was Bishop of Skara in Sweden. For the first third of the eighteenth century, Bishop Svedberg was personally responsible for the mission work of the Church of Sweden in the Delaware Valley; he styled himself "Bishop of Skara and America," though he never visited his most distant parishes.

Swedish Americans have no single center for preserving and protecting their history, but Philadelphia has the American Swedish Historical Museum in Franklin D. Roosevelt Park. Its location

here is due largely to Amandus Johnson, the leading scholar of the history of New Sweden, who spent most of his career in Philadelphia. The imposing building houses a large permanent exhibition on the New Sweden colony. There are rooms devoted to the career of Jenny Lind (the "Swedish Nightingale"), to John Ericsson and his inventions (such as the turret warship *Monitor*), to the work of Swedish artists and artisans, and to other permanent or current interests of Swedish Americans. The Foundation that operates this museum also conducts an extensive educational program, and several social events are held for the local Swedish community during the year. These events include the traditional Swedish Midsummer celebration and the Lucia Festival before Christmas, as well as films, lectures and parties of a less nostalgic sort.

The characteristic shades of blue and gold found in the flag of Sweden are also the colors of the official flag of the city of Philadelphia. This choice of colors pays tribute to the early days of Swedish settlement. It is small enough homage to pay for a heritage that has been, and will continue to be, a great strength to this Commonwealth.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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